

## Epilogue

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THE historical concept of the Renaissance as it was developed and celebrated by Jakob Burckhardt and his followers contains a paradox that derives from the contradiction between the conscious aims and ambitions of the men of the fifteenth century and later appreciations of their accomplishments. What historians have taken to be a brilliant series of revolutionary innovations was originally undertaken in a self-conscious and determined effort to recapture the past. The great humanists, artists, rulers, and adventurers of the period, that is, had their eyes turned, not on the future generations who would acclaim them, but on the lost heritage of their ancient predecessors. Consequently, the immediate fruits of their labors were all retrospective: a keenly renewed interest in the study of history and mythology, the revival of classic forms of art and literature, the restoration of the unity of the church and the purity of sacred texts, the revival of feudal government and chivalrous society, and the recovery of prosperity and economic security.

Hoping to bolster or replace the tottering traditions of mediaeval culture, Renaissance intellectuals and artists

set out to recapture what they considered the lost moral and intellectual grandeur of the classical past. Instead, they often handed on to posterity—unwittingly as well as unintentionally—new and revolutionary ideas and attitudes. In their efforts to resurrect old concepts of governance, both clerical scholars in the employ of church councils and lay publicists in the service of new princes adumbrated much of the modern theory of political secularism and constitutionalism. Architects, sculptors, and painters were led, through their imitation of classical models, to new discoveries in techniques and design. At the same time, by their intensive study of the works of Livy and Polybius, historians developed a modern historical perspective and political science.

The inherent contradiction is strikingly illustrated by the intentions and achievements of Niccolò Machiavelli and Christopher Columbus. No two men better represent the spirit of the Renaissance—Machiavelli as an intellectual, humanist, and critic, Columbus as an adventurer, courtier, and discoverer. *The Prince*, perhaps more than any other single work, epitomizes the demystified realism taken by so many historians as the hallmark of Renaissance thought. But even if he is credited with inventing modern politics, Machiavelli's emotional commitment was to ancient Rome. He is said to have worn a toga as he worked in his study, and he seriously advocated the revival of the weapons and tactics of the Roman legion at a time when cannons were making their appearance on the field of battle. Similarly Columbus, whose discovery of the New World surely must be regarded as the greatest achievement of the age, not only had not dreamed of making a discovery, but failed even to realize what he had accomplished. Instead, he had hoped to restore

Genoa's lost commercial primacy by opening a new, shorter ocean route to the Orient and, incidentally, to rediscover legendary kingdoms long believed lost to European travelers. Thus, the two men of the Renaissance who may have made the greatest contributions to the world we know were concerned exclusively with reviving the glories of the past.

In every field, efforts to restore and preserve the old led inadvertently but inevitably to startling and unexpected discoveries. Although, for the men of the Renaissance, their most important accomplishment was the recovery of Greek and Latin classics, the real significance of this achievement was not, as its authors supposed, the development of a fuller understanding of the past. Instead, because the study of pagan antiquity sparked parallel efforts to re-evaluate early Christian literature, its results included the religious reformations and the wars of the following centuries, as well as the eventual triumph of toleration and secularism with which they ended. The humanists also recovered the scientific works of the ancients, opening the way to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. The Renaissance humanists, in short, effected a catalysis in the western intellectual tradition that was to go far beyond their aims or ambitions.

Perhaps more important was the expansion of horizons caused by Renaissance discoveries. Though Columbus and his captains found neither the lost kingdoms nor the easy passage to India they sought, they proved that the ocean sea was conquerable and stumbled upon an unknown world. Their exploits furnished unprecedented riches for their European monarchs and opened literally unlimited new prospects that led almost immediately to

the exploration and colonization of the distant coasts of the New World. By the eighteenth century Europeans had turned the Atlantic into an enormous "Mediterranean," and by the nineteenth their oceanic civilization encompassed the entire globe.

By accelerating an already growing awareness of man as not merely a terrestrial being but as one capable of mastering his world, the recoveries and the discoveries produced a secular outlook and concern that would bequeath to subsequent centuries the impetus to alleviate suffering, oppression, and injustice in human society.

Long before they undertook voyages across uncharted seas, Europeans had begun reconstruction at home. In despair over the chaos accompanying their failure to make feudalism, or feudal monarchy, work, some elements of European society began to give their support, more or less grudgingly, to strong princes and the centralized states they were beginning to create. Untrammelled personal authority, increasingly supported by a growing sense of common national purpose, proved to be the only force—as Machiavelli had seemed to argue—capable of imposing order on, and providing security for, Europe's turbulent population. New absolute monarchies that embodied his concept would culminate centuries later in nation states, but they first emerged in the Renaissance.

Among the chief supporters of the new dynasties were the bourgeoisie, members of a new socioeconomic class who were also just beginning to exert their full political influence. Taking advantage of new types of land contracts, improved credit facilities, and advances in technology, these men, few in number at first, were destined—at least in western Europe—to become a dominant class of capitalist entrepreneurs directing the expansion of

European commerce overseas and, eventually, the development of our modern industrial economy.

Without the new confidence engendered by the humanists' affirmation of the worth of man and the world, and without the new opportunities for economic exploitation in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, however, the Renaissance innovations in technology, business, statecraft, art, and letters could probably not have been supported on such a lavish scale. Like the recurrent renaissances and reform movements of the Middle Ages, they might well have run a limited course and perished. But with a wholly new orientation and a new and unprecedented source of economic support, they were not only to survive but to alter the course of history. Recovery led first to a restoration of lost values but then inadvertently to the innovation and expansion which both separated the modern from all preceding cultures and established the civilization of western Europe as the model for the entire world.

